



# Psychology Dictionary

BY STAFF OF ACS DISTANCE EDUCATION

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## INTRODUCTION

This book has been developed as a reference tool for the discipline of Psychology. The Psychology Dictionary contains descriptions for common terms used in Psychology. There are many terms used in the area of Psychology alone, that are explained throughout this text. Other terms have been taken from everyday language and used in a different context to describe psychological phenomena.

The Psychology Dictionary can be used to complement studies in Psychology or Counselling, as a resource for the professional, or as a reference for anyone interested in Psychology.

The information in this book is derived from a broad cross section of resources (research, reference materials and personal experience) from the authors and editorial assistants in the academic department of ACS Distance Education. It is, to the best of our knowledge, composed as an accurate representation of what is accepted and appropriate information about the subject, at the time of publication.

The authors fully recognise that knowledge is continually changing, and awareness in all areas of study is constantly evolving. As such, we encourage the reader to recognise that nothing they read should ever be considered to be set in stone. They should always strive to broaden their perspective and deepen their understanding of a subject, and before acting upon any information or advice, should always seek to confirm the currency of that information, and the appropriateness to the situation in which they find themselves.

As such, the publisher and author do not accept any liability for actions taken by the reader based upon their reading of this book.



# A

**abnormal psychology** The branch of Psychology that examines abnormal behaviour.

**accomodation** In Piaget's theory, the modification of existing ways of thinking to interpret and deal with new information.

**acculturation** The gradual acquisition of behaviour from the culture that surrounds the child.

**acquired** Aspects which are learned, rather than innate.

**acquisition** The learning of a new form of behaviour

**action potential** The momentary change in electrical potential in a nerve cell when a nerve cell is activated.

**acuity** Describes the ability to discern fine detail in perception, eg. visual acuity.

**acute** Sudden, sharp, highly sensitive, relatively short lived.

**adaptation** Refers to a change that occurs in response to some environmental stimulus. It can be a temporary change (e.g. the responsiveness of a sensory receptor after being stimulated), adapting to a new social or cultural environment, or a behaviour or structural change is response to a survival need.

**ADD/ADHD** Attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder.

**addiction** A psychological or physiological overdependence on something.

**adjustment disorder** A disorder that arises from a maladaptive response to a stressful situation, usually temporary.

**adrenal gland** A gland in the endocrine system located near the kidney that secretes hormones, generally in response to stress, e.g. epinephrine and cortisol.

**affect** Emotion or mood.

**agnosia** Means "not knowing". Agnosia is a neurological problem that causes an Agnostic person to be able to sense an object, but is unable to consciously recognise and interpret it. This can happen in most

perceptual/cognitive systems.

**agoraphobia** a fear of open spaces.

**akatamathesia** The loss of ability to comprehend.

**akinesia** Loss of motor control.

**algnesia** Describes the sensation of pain, specifically the sensitivity to pain.

**alienation** A feeling of separation from others.

**altruism** A type of helping behaviour in which there is actual or potential risk to the helper.

**ambiguity** Something that has more than one meaning or interpretation.

**ambivalence** Simultaneous liking and disliking of a person or object.

**amnesia** Memory loss that can occur for a number of different reasons and in a number of different ways.

**amygdala** Part of the limbic system in the brain, the amygdala plays an important role in emotion and motivation.

**anal stage** A phase in the psychoanalytic (Freudian) theory of psychosexual development (generally between ages 1-3 years) marked by a fascination with the anus and it's functions.

**androgen** Sex hormones responsible for the development of male sex characteristics.

**anorexia nervosa** An eating disorder characterised by an obsessive and disturbed preoccupation with body image. Anorexics have an intense fear of becoming obese, and frequently exercise excessively and diet to the point of starvation.

**antisocial** Behaviour that is unpleasant and disruptive to society.

**antisocial personality disorder** A disorder characterised by irresponsible and antisocial behaviour starting in childhood or adolescence.

**anxiety disorder** A blanket term for a range of disorders that have severe anxiety as the main disturbance, for example post traumatic stress disorder and generalized anxiety disorder.

**apathy** Listlessness, passiveness.

**aphasia** Partial or complete loss of language ability, due to a lesion in the brain.

**aptitude** The potential for achievement.

**arousal** A heightened state of activity or functioning, or readiness for activity.

**ascendance** The tendency to take on a leadership role in social situations.

**Asch situation** Term used to describe conformity in studies by Solomon Asch where participant's judgements are affected by the judgements of the rest of the group.

**Asperger's syndrome** A disorder that displays some aspects of autism characteristics - such as difficulty with social interaction, and restrictive repetitive patterns of interest and behaviours - whilst maintaining more normal linguistic and cognitive development than people with autism.

**assimilation** To take in, absorb, or integrate information and take it on as your own, e.g. cultural assimilation is when you take on the culture of people around you. In Piaget's theory, assimilation is the process of using an existing schema for interpreting and dealing with new information.

**association** A connection between stimuli where the occurrence of one automatically recalls the other.

**assumption** Supposition upon which theories are based.

**attachment** An emotional tie between people usually with the connotation of dependency, that having the other person close will bring emotional satisfaction, and being separated will cause distress.

**attachment theory** Looks at the attachments that form between people, primarily an infant and its primary caregiver(s). Initially studied by Bowlby, this theory states that for normal social and emotional development to occur, a baby must form a relationship with at least one caregiver.

**attention** Focusing of perception leading to heightened awareness.

**attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADD/**

**ADHD)** A disorder that starts in childhood and is evidence by hyperactive and impulsive behaviour, and attentional deficits.

**attitude** In psychology, an attitude refers to an internal, cognitive and emotive construct that represents how the individual feels about something. It can be positive, negative or neutral.

**attraction** Characteristics that create an approach response from another person or object.

**attribution** The way we explain certain behaviours

**attribution theory** Focuses on the processes involved when individuals try to explain another's behaviour.

**auditory** The sense of hearing.

**authoritarian** A method of control where a single individual has authority to make decisions and demands and others submit to the individual.

**authoritarian personality** A description for someone who seeks an authoritarian social system. They tend to be obedient and subservient to those in authority, and domineering and controlling of those over whom they have authority.

**autism** A lifelong developmental disability that is characterised by difficulties in social interaction, communication, restricted and repetitive behaviours, and sensory sensitivities. Autism occurs on a spectrum, where people can experience a range of severity of difficulties. Asperger's syndrome is the lower end of the spectrum.

**autonomic** Acting or occurring involuntarily, self-controlling or self-regulating.

**autonomic nervous system (ANS)** A division of the nervous system with two subdivisions – the parasympathetic and the sympathetic. The autonomic nervous system functions involuntarily to the organism and is self-regulating.

**aversion** A dislike for something.

**aversion therapy** Concerned with the use of aversive stimuli in a controlled manner to change behaviour patterns therapeutically.

**avoidance learning** A type of operant learning

where a response is learnt in order to avoid an unpleasant stimuli.

**avoidant personality disorder** A disorder where an individual is so afraid of rejection they will avoid forming relationships altogether. Generally characterised by low self-esteem.

**awareness** Being conscious of something.

**axon** The part of the neuron that transmits action potentials from the cell body to other neurons.

# B

**basal ganglia** A collection of nuclei, situated at the base of the forebrain. These structures are involved in voluntary motor control, procedural learning, and cognition.

**behaviour disorder** A generic term for behaviour that is maladaptive to the extent that it requires treatment from counsellors or therapists.

**behaviour** The activities of an organism which can be observed by another organism.

**behaviourism** A psychology approach that considers that true understanding of behaviour can only be achieved by studying measurable, observable behaviour.

**behaviour therapy** A therapeutic approach that focuses on the behaviour, and strategies to modify the behaviour, rather than on underlying conflicts or root causes.

**belief** The acceptance of an idea or statement as true or real.

**bias** A tendency that makes a particular outcome more likely or favourable than another. A lack of fairness.

**binding site** The region of the postsynaptic receptor where neurotransmitters or drugs attach and form a chemical bond.

**biofeedback** Information about bodily functions from an outside source that is feedback to the organism to modify its functioning.

**biopsychosocial model** A model that considers biological, psychological and social influences to all contribute to and influence human functioning.

**biosocial** Behaviour that occurs as a result of both biological and social influences.

**bipolar disorder** A mood disorder in which the individual experiences both manic and depressive episodes.

**blocking** The inhibition or obstruction of a thought, language, or mental process.

**body image** The subjective perception of one's body and the judgement of how others would perceive their body. Generally a positive or negative evaluation.

**body language** The conveyance of information through nonverbal means, including facial expressions, gestures, posture and body positioning.

**borderline Personality Disorder** A personality disorder that was originally thought to be on the "borderline" of psychosis. It is characterised by unstable personal relationships, self-harm, disturbed self-image, mood instability and impulsive behaviours.

**brain stem** Situated at the base of the brain, connecting to the top of the spinal cord, the brain stem is responsible for survival functions such as breathing, digestion, heartbeat, and arousal.

**brainstorming** A problem-solving technique where participants come up with as many ideas and solutions as they can.

**bulimia nervosa** An eating disorder characterised by episodes of binge eating, followed by self-induced vomiting and/or use of laxatives. Episodes are usually associated with depression and followed by guilt and self-deprecation.

**bystander apathy** The tendency of people in social situations not to help strangers in an emergency. The more bystanders there are, the greater the apathy, as responsibility is perceived as not belonging to one individual.